

1 Introduction

Anthony Giddens has recently heralded the emergence of a post-scarcity society, particularly, but not only, in industrialised countries. He characterises post-scarcity society not by universal abundance but by a current of post-materialism in industrialised nations, a decline in productivism and the centrality of paid work in social life and values. He sees a growing awareness of 'manufactured' risk and uncertainty and the limitations of technological fixes in such societies, and a change of political debate and expression from emancipatory politics concerned with 'freedom from oppression, with social justice and with the diminishing of socioeconomic inequalities' (1995: 7) towards what he calls 'life politics'. Post-materialism is also a feature of recent postmodern critiques of development which raise important challenges to poverty discourses. For me, this also raises concerns about the possibly ethnocentric politics, not to mention the well-being outcomes, of western postmaterialism in a world of continuing and severe material inequalities.

Although postmodernism¹ has been slow to take root in development studies this state of affairs is changing quite rapidly. Both poverty and gender and development (GAD) paradigms contrast starkly with some basic postmodernist stances (Gardener and Lewis 1996; Nicholson 1990; Parpart 1993; Escobar 1995). This brief essay intends to open up discussion around two broad questions: first, what elements in a postmodernist approach are particularly challenging to ideas about poverty, development and gender analysis? Second, with regard to some of these problem areas, what ideas, approaches and discursive

¹ I use the terms postmodernism and poststructuralism fairly interchangeably since the differences are not significant for my purpose here and the overlap is considerable. Included within the terms here are the rejection of a rationalist world view and modernity, of the idea of objective reality, of the project of grand theory and the dominance of western knowledge systems (especially science). Alternative approaches are based instead on deconstruction, on discourse analysis and textuality, on Foucauldian notions of power and on local narratives or stories rather than meta-narratives, the dominant truth claims of modernity. Vast literatures surround these areas which I make no attempt to survey, but merely indicate a small selection of particularly relevant and accessible material.

Post Poverty, Gender and Develop- ment?

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resources might gender analysis draw upon in a response to the postist critique that is positive but ultimately sustains a belief in some non-negotiable idea of gender justice and well-being rights?

At the very schematic level possible here I have not disaggregated approaches to poverty reduction or poverty definitions in any detail. This is because at heart they all assume that progress is possible, that material deprivation is universally harmful and unjust, that gender relations and interests accentuate or modify the experience of poverty and that there is some kind of role for development interventions in redressing this situation.

Certain varieties of poverty understandings are less susceptible to the poststructural critique, such as the more qualitative and subjectively-defined positions. But it seems to me that none escape unscathed. Martha Nussbaum's account of the WIDER² conferences of the late 1980s sets out the encounter between development theorists of poverty and postmodernists rather memorably. She describes how discussions of 'quality of life' led on to the questions of cultural relativism v universalism, that is, whether we should seek universal measures of quality of life for all men and women, or 'defer instead to the many different norms that traditional cultures have selected' (Nussbaum and Glover 1995: 4). The choice between the voice of tradition or a critical universalism, in this case Sen's capabilities framework, is depicted in the exchanges between those taking up these opposing stances on embeddedness and freedom. In one instance, poststructuralists saw unified value systems which consider menstruating women as polluting in **both** the home and the workplace as admirably embedded, while universalists regarded such practices as devaluing and inhibiting to women. In another interchange, poststructuralists objected to capability talk on the grounds that it universalises the western attachment to freedom of choice, citing as evidence the delegation of choice over what to eat or wear by Japanese males to their wives (*op cit.* 64). In these examples universalists have defended the rights of individual women and men to freedom (from constraining or devaluing pollution beliefs)

and to the capability for independent existence, or autonomy. Postmodernists have, on the other hand, regarded these qualities as culturally and historically relative to the value system of the west, and as cultural expressions of different rather than inferior value systems, in which the individual is embedded in his or her community and questions of freedom are inappropriate. That these issues are intensely gendered is indicated in these examples, for the meaning of embeddedness is clearly rather different for different actors. But the point I wish make here is that if the capabilities approach is contested in this way then so too are poverty assessments, lines and indeed any attempt to specify human need.

Sen's capabilities approach to well-being asks 'what are the people of country X actually able to be and do?' and compares the answers (the functionings) for different groups within that country. It is not inherently universalistic as functionings could be entirely locally specified, but Sen has insisted that capabilities, as indeed his cooperative conflicts model of intrahousehold relations does, need to go beyond 'utility' as the satisfaction of subjective preferences, to recognise that preferences can be distorted by power relations and the experience of deprivation. Therefore they cannot be a **complete** account of well-being. Thus Sen, and particularly Martha Nussbaum, would argue that the approaches taken in the **Human Development Report** cannot be irrelevant to understandings of well-being.

What then are the features, very broadly, of poverty talk which are in the firing line, and what are some of the implications for gender and development? Poverty discourses are, of course, far from unchanging or consensual. For example, their consideration of needs is suspect from the perspective of many orthodox economists for whom needs are simply subjective preferences which determine priorities free from any objective or universal hierarchy of need. However, Marxist challenges to the equation of wants and needs, and the basic needs school in development studies, has established an approach to well-being which transcends subjective preferences, and commodity consumption, towards a

² Arguments about well-being and the relativist challenge, are set out clearly in relation to gender and development in the published work emerging from the WIDER conferences on the quality of life (Nussbaum and Sen

1993), the following volume which applied the capabilities approach to gender (Nussbaum and Glover 1995), as well as the Apfel-Marglin and Marglin collection (1990).

broader understanding and a normative stance based on universal need (see Doyal and Gough 1991). This is a reasonable approximation of what is implicitly common to poverty and GAD discourses and interventions. In the following sections I consider some of the arguments made against poverty reduction and GAD in postmodernist critiques, and I attempt to find a constructive engagement with these, whilst defending a form of feminist humanism (Soper 1990).

2 'Things to Words'

Understandings of inequality, power, dominance and subordination are now increasingly approached through the deconstruction of language and text, and with little reference to the material in social relations. This is not only an effect of discourse analyses posing the questions of who can say what, and in which circumstances, but also, Michele Barrett persuasively argues, of a turn towards culture within feminism, where social sciences have 'lost their purchase' by comparison to the arts, humanities and philosophy, and interest is now greatest in symbolisation, representation, subjectivity and the self (Barrett 1992).

The shift from materialism is a feature of postist understandings of poverty, where culture, ideas and symbols are discursively interesting and constitutive of power, whilst materiality is of questionable status, and at least suspect. From such a perspective, poverty is then discursively constructed as a justification for development activity, and poverty as an experience becomes largely a state of mind, rather than a state of mind and body as previous formulations might suggest. The conservatism which follows upon the absence of materialist perspectives in some new social movements (e.g. the New Ageist: 'You can be happy living in cardboard boxes' and 'poverty [is]...a gift' (Pepper 1993: 142)) serves as a warning of the implications of an exclusively non-materialist concept of poverty.

In development studies as a discipline, there have been similar shifts away from the emphases on, for example, basic needs a couple of decades ago, which were clearly oriented around material needs, to the current neo-liberal agenda of democracy and liberalisation. Katherine Fierlbeck points out that one of the consequences has been that the material

inequality of women has been eclipsed by the principle of 'consent' as the basis of political legitimacy:

The brutal paradox is that whilst the least controversial evidence of women's marginalisation is the striking and physical and economic disparity they experience, such disparity can be dismissed as relevant proof of marginalisation as long as women can be perceived to have 'consented' to such conditions. (Fierlbeck 1995: 24)

Social relations of material inequality are thereby placed beyond critique by the idea of consent.

A mechanically materialist approach to poverty is patently unsatisfactory, and this has been argued in gender studies where notions of well-being clearly include qualities beyond command over material resources. But the refusal to acknowledge physical needs, such as health (and even life), as centrally constitutive of well-being is equally problematic, as three examples of postmodern work which stress cultural violence and give little significance to physical bodily violence, show. Gayatri Spivak's famous article on *sati* (1985), which analyses the anti-*sati* colonial legislation, and its pro-*sati* opposition, argues that both the colonial British and indigenous Hindu cultures discursively objectified the women they positioned in either 'the Hindu manipulation of female *subject*-constitution' (Spivak 1985: 127, original emphasis), or in the case of the British, as victims requiring protection, thereby justifying the 'civilising' mission of colonialism. But no weight is given to the real deaths of real women, and both the attack and the defence of *sati* are damned equally. Felix Padel's book on the colonial eradication of Kond traditions of human sacrifice and female infanticide in Orissa insists that this was a greater violence than the very numerous deaths of girls and sacrificial victims (Padel 1995). Finally, Frederique Apffel-Marglin's analysis of smallpox inoculation campaigns argues that outlawing traditional Indian prophylaxis (variolation) and imposing vaccination, which was more effective and much safer, was an example of the 'logocentric medical (and developmental) discourse [which] constructs death as the absolutely negative' (1990: 124). She goes further than Spivak and Padel to suggest that lives saved by vaccination rather than variolation were not a

justification for its imposition, for she argues against what she sees as the western binary opposition of life and death, and the idea of death as enemy and as failure. However in all these examples the material outcomes for the lives of those who experienced these struggles, foreshortened lives and painful deaths for some, seems to me to be both highly relevant and worrying absent.

Postmodern ideas about power emphasise not systematically unequal access to resources but differential abilities to make and shape discourse and language (as statements, terms, categories and beliefs), whilst poverty and well-being is at least partly about command over material resources. Needs are discursive in postmodern perspectives. They are constituted by language with little or no reference to material relations, yet from a gender perspective power relations have been conceptualised as both material and discursive, and linked in complex ways rather than one way determinations.

The limitations of postmodernist approaches to poverty can possibly be seen in, for example, Arturo Escobar's book **Encountering Development**. He writes of the violence of western representations of hungry people in the south, and deconstructs the discursive power and sinister intentions of development, but does not interrogate the complex real experience of hunger. He briefly asserts that per capita food availability in the south has not increased but he gives no serious attention to the veracity of this assertion or to changes over time (1995: 103). He is satisfied with a crudely functionalist view in which the development apparatus is said to create client categories ('malnourished', 'lactating women' etc) which are 'consistent with the creation and reproduction of modern capitalist relations' (*op cit.* 106). Whilst Escobar states that 'there is no discourse analysis that is unrelated to materialities' (1995: 130) he fails to deliver an account of this relatedness which is other than that of determining and powerful discourse 'making' the Third World.

Whilst one would agree with the importance of a discourse analysis and of institutional ethnography, this needs to be harnessed to relations between these and material outcomes, which do not follow in a linear fashion from policy hopes, intentions

and statements (see Apthorpe and Gasper 1996). Indeed the disconnections between policy and outcomes have been the focus of considerable debate in the gender and development field where understanding agency, of development personnel and especially of women and men 'participants' and actors in development activities, has shown that the power of development discourse can be exaggerated. A discourse analysis such as Escobar's is arguably more susceptible to objectification of peoples of the south as helpless victims than approaches which take subversion and material outcomes more seriously. Many gender analysts might disagree with Escobar that '[t]he local level must reproduce the world as the top sees it' (1995: 111). The nature of feminist enquiry has confronted the multiplicity of discourses at all levels and has constantly problematised these in terms of their effects and their constraints, such that 'discourse' is not confined to development agencies (as Escobar's analysis implies) but multiple and conflictive and defying a simple opposition of the (singular) local and the oppressive developmental.

One example of a feminist approach which seems to me to deal with how to retain a materialist element in understandings of gendered poverty, but one which is sensitive to the complex relationships between material life and symbolic and cultural meanings, is the work on embodied subjectivity and gender. This links the objective material needs of women with the subjective, culturalised ideas about, and constructions of, needs in a useful way, and denies the dualistic character of the words v things arguments. Thus Henrietta Moore indicates the usefulness of Bourdieu's concept of habitus as 'that set of structuring principles and common schemes of perception and conception that generate practices and representations' (1994: 78). Subjectivity is material, social distinctions are enacted through one's body, over time. The 'subject' is never separated from the material conditions of its existence, and the world is never free of the representations that construct it' (Moore 1994: 80).

3 Humanism and Essentialism in Poverty Reduction and GAD

Humanism³ has become a major target of

³ There are many humanisms – for example, liberalism and Marxism are humanist – but all centre on the special

qualities of individual human beings and on the goal of the full development of each human being's potential.

postmodernist critique; thus development can be derided as that 'most noble of activities, the be-all and end-all of the humanist project: the improvement of the human condition' (Hirschmann 1995: 44) by postmodernist feminist critics, in this case attacking the DAWN book (Sen and Grown 1988) for placing poor women at the centre of their analysis.

The problem with humanism is that it is seen to be irretrievably contaminated by a particular notion of the human subject which requires an object to dominate (Rosenau 1992: 46) and which is associated with imperialism, for example in the idea of colonialism as a civilising mission. Further, the human subject is constructed in a particular form, rational, white and male, with the ethnocentric and androcentric assumptions this entails. Dominant groups have defined what is human and imposed this on others. The implicit critique of Sen's capabilities approach, and of poverty reduction concerns, is that they claim to know what are the capabilities which humans should have, and in this way humanism legitimates poverty reduction activities in development.

Whilst the idea of the human surely has been abused in a number of ways, I am unsure that humanism, or the capabilities framework, is **necessarily** a gender blind and ethnocentric imposition which does violence to other non-western notions of persons. The question is, for me, most easily resolved in the manner I heard Michael Freeman⁴ answer a question about whether human rights were a western imposition on other cultures. He simply asked which specific human right the questioner thought had such a character – possibly the right to freedom from arbitrary arrest? In the same manner, looking at Nussbaum's list of capabilities it is hard to find any to seriously object to⁵.

The Enlightenment legacy of the human subject as male, white, rational and dominant is neither so monolithic as has been suggested, nor so immutable; indeed it seems to me that a reworking of concepts of what it means to be human is what many feminists have been so fruitfully engaged with over the past decades, including in development

studies. I find no contradiction between humanism and the idea of multiple subjectivities which most GAD approaches increasingly work with (see Moore 1994).

The charge of essentialism is a major element in postist critiques of poverty and GAD; the concept of a poor person, rather important to poverty reduction in development, being doubly challenged by post structuralism. Poverty is seen as an essentialising construct since it has been used to generalise women in the south as vulnerable objects of development interventions and the Other of western feminism (Mohanty 1988). Of this process Spivak wrote; 'in spite of the heterogeneous information-retrieval about her, the monolithic subject assigned the proper name 'Third World Woman' – consolidating a certain desire for the narcissistic Other – stands as evidence.' (1985: 130). It is interesting to observe however that in a speech to the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, 1994, Gayatri Spivak used the terms 'the poor women of the south' and even 'the poor woman of the south' (1995: 3) in her attack on northern feminists for focusing reproductive rights on abortion. Spivak argues that northern feminists assume 'that the able woman of the North is a person endowed with subjectivity and that the poor woman of the South should of course want what she herself wants' (1995: 3). She goes on to claim that 'where extreme poverty makes children mean social security the right to abortion is immaterial'. Whatever the details of this debate (see the reply by Feldman in the same issue), essentialising statements and the denial of subjectivity are certainly on display, as they usually are where one attempts to speak 'about women'.

Universalist approaches to poverty are positing capabilities which transcend cultural and historical boundaries as the index of human well-being and which run the risk of essentialising human nature, although Nussbaum says that hers is an historically sensitive universalism in which 'sameness' are points within cultural diversity. The charge that WID essentialises women through constructs of poverty and vulnerability which universalise and remove women from spatial, historical and cultural

⁴ At a seminar at the School of Development Studies, University of East Anglia, March 1997, on Asian Values and Human Rights.

⁵ Although some aspects of Nussbaum's lists and methods are questioned. See Wolf (1995).

contexts, possibly has some validity. But the extension of this criticism to GAD seems to me poorly founded, given the emphasis in GAD on social relations and context, on differences amongst women, as well as on agency (e.g. Kabeer 1994; Agarwal 1994).

The most constructive approach to this deeply congealed, and increasingly tedious, opposition between essentialism and social constructionism is probably still that of Diane Fuss. She points out that all social science concepts (e.g. the working class) carry traces of essentialism, that we need to distinguish between nominal/linguistic essentialism (e.g. in talking about women) and the explicit suggestion of unchanging essences (e.g. in ecofeminist thought). And she argues that what matters is the ends to which essentialism is deployed (Fuss 1989). To draw attention to the material disadvantage faced by many women in the south does **not** constitute significant essentialism, combined as it is in GAD approaches with an analysis of their agency, of the class and ethnic variations in gendered disadvantage and the ongoing changes in the lived experiences of such women. In the case of poverty reduction it seems to me that what essentialism exists is at such a level of generality (humans need health and autonomy) as to have little political dangers.

The radical politics of postmodernism are, appropriately, imaginary however, and as Udayagiri (1995) points out, the textual focus of postmodern analysis renders real lives almost irrelevant, and its deconstruction suggests no political agenda and undermines notions of emancipatory change. Udayagiri argues that, for all its failings WID and GAD have real achievements to their credit. It has created political space for feminists in academia, refigured meanings of development, brought women into international fora and debates, and redirected resources towards gender issues. For Udayagiri postmodernists 'evade the moral issues of poverty, hunger, inadequate health care and lack of literacy which have historically been of central concern to the scholarship on Women and Development' (1995: 175).

4 Representing Women and Poverty

Postmodernist anti-representationalism extends to politics, language and epistemology and maintains that a person cannot be re-presented as, or in, another person without distortion, loss of content or violation of intention. Thus 'representative democracy is alienating; representative art is boring; representative literature is desecrating; representative history is deceptive ... it signifies mastery' (Rosenau 1992: 94).

The question of representation has been problematised by postmodernism in a way which has given new urgency to discussions about women's gender interests and how they can be known in a development context (Molyneux 1985, 1997 forthcoming; Jones and Jonasdottir, 1988; Fierlbeck 1996). How is it that we know what local perceptions of poverty consist of, or what women see as their gender interests, and what status do we give to which voices? Since Molyneux's seminal paper, gender interests have been seen as historically, culturally, politically and discursively constituted, and issues of representation have been very much in the foreground, particularly in discussions of women's 'subjective' and 'objective' interests, of false consciousness and the epistemological problems around representing gender interests. As I understand it, a GAD position is generally one that accepts that no representation can be a direct reflection of those represented, but is committed to creating the conditions where a multitude of voices representing selves and groups can be heard, and distortion, loss of content and violation of intention minimised.

This is hardly a resolution, and arguably a feeble declaration of intent, but an awareness of this problem has certainly characterised GAD discourses. What requires defence in a postmodern ambience is the assertion that beyond women's voices are legitimate representations of 'objective' gender interests (Sen 1990), and that it is possible to speak for some subaltern interests identified in this way, not as a substitute for self perceptions of gender interests but as a legitimate dimension through which to engage with, and understand, these perceptions. The distinction between interests and needs goes back to the beginning of the 1980s in GAD, and if there is a consensus it is probably around the idea that gender interests are everywhere different,

change over time, and are distinguished by their short- and long-term, practical or strategic character. Needs too are socially constructed (but not only), they are dynamic and they are politicised in every element. But instead of rejecting the needs idiom Nancy Fraser usefully asks 'What opportunities and/or obstacles does the needs idiom pose for movements, like feminism, that seek far-reaching social transformation?' (1990: 162) This indeed is what the recent debates about gender and poverty have been centrally about.

The ways in which GAD may strengthen its discursive understandings is suggested in Nancy Fraser's framework which illuminates two important parts of that debate; firstly, the ways in which gender has become institutionally married to poverty (Jackson 1996; Kabeer 1996; Chant this volume); and secondly, the processes which lead to internalisation of subordination norms by women.

Fraser suggests shifting focus from needs alone to include discourses about needs, and this allows attention to the politics of need at three levels: the struggle to establish or refute the status of a need; the struggle over interpretation of the need, to define it and thereby define how it might be met; and the struggle over the meeting of needs, to obtain or refuse provision (Fraser 1989: 164). The discursive resources available in these struggles include the recognised idioms of needs, rights and interests, the range of vocabularies for making claims (e.g. administrative, feminist), the styles of argumentation (e.g. appeal to forms of legitimacy such as democratic processes), the according of privilege to certain groups, (such as the 'needy'), the narrative conventions which establish social identities, and, finally, the modes of subjectification, i.e. the ways in which people are positioned and endowed with expected qualities – for example, as victims, as activists, as deviants, or as deserving.

Early feminists in development successfully established arguments about the particular needs of women through the work of authors such as Boserup who used recognised idioms and vocabularies of exclusion, and of potential contribution to

economic development. Later work in the WID paradigm made explicit claims for the efficiency of gender-aware development and sectoral specifications consistent with the conventional administrative divisions of labour in development agencies. In these discursive struggles, poverty arguments that women were 'the poorest of the poor' had a special place, since poverty reduction lies beyond questions at the heart of development studies and practice, and the portrayal of women as poor, helpless, virtuous and deserving was, arguably, very discursively effective. The discussion of the consequences of these strategies, and the critique of development agencies 'instrumentalism', continues (see **IDS Bulletin** Vol 23 No 3), and new discursive opportunities present themselves, for example in the current efforts, much in evidence at Beijing in 1995, to slipstream human rights vocabularies. Within this changing terrain the DAWN book has been discursively significant and effective since it intervened with 'voices of women of the south' at a time when development conventions were taking a conveniently participatory turn, and in a way which neutralised reactionary arguments that feminism was the sole concern of white western women⁶. To criticise the DAWN book for essentialism, as Hirschmann (1995) does, is overblown in my opinion anyway, and to say nothing of its discursive intervention and effects is a rather strange move for a postmodernist. Strategic moves which successfully broke down the idea of poverty as gender neutral, simultaneously gave rise to second generation challenges over how to continually repoliticise gender needs. Labelling, polarising and evaluating approaches, e.g. WID, WAD, GAD (Rathgeber 1990), has been a major preoccupation of academic gender and development discourses (authorising our expertise?), and one which postmodernists look set to follow. Yet Fraser's lead suggests another emphasis; an engagement with understanding the effects and outcomes of particular discursive moves. In the gender and poverty arena for example, it suggests an historically and institutionally located analysis of key poverty texts, actors, arguments, evidence and outcomes.

To turn to the second issue which Fraser's approach

⁶ It was unfortunate that the important and valid arguments which pointed to the inadequacies of western feminist ideas about women in the south, and to differences within the category 'women', resonated with

those who, for other reasons, wished to dismiss feminist engagement with development as 'culturally inappropriate'.

illuminates, that of the self perception of interests and needs. Some discursive resources are authorised and official, and others are unauthorised, non-hegemonic and unofficial, so that some ways of talking about gender needs are what Fraser calls 'enclaved' i.e. normally excluded from the central discursive arenas and thereby depoliticised (1989: 165). Thus, for example, needs for personal security may be enclaved as a private and domestic issue rather than a need. Needs talk also varies with the 'discursive publics' involved, i.e. the content and forms of argumentation depend on the socially differentiated publics they aim at; publics formed by relations of occupation, power, of class, of political ideology. Thus, certain needs are depoliticised by enclaving them as personal or domestic (e.g. reproductive needs) and therefore private and non-political; or as economic (e.g. gender differentials in wages) and therefore technical and non-political. These discourses are directed to specialised publics associated with, say, family planning or economic planners, and thereby enclaved and bounded from recognition as contested. This is partly why members of dominated groups internalise views on their own needs which perpetuate their disadvantage, and why the experience of need does not always generate a wider questioning of dominance and subordination, but is instead defused by direction towards specialised publics and depoliticised discourse. It is also partly why the strategic meanings of practical needs are not always apparent to those experiencing them; e.g. 'I am unwell and I need a doctor', rather than 'I am unwell because I have a weak position within my household and I am over-worked'. The discursive field around needs is a significant part of the mystification of gender relations.

However, there are moments when these depoliticising processes are challenged and disrupted and oppositional interpretations of need escape, needs and their solutions lose their quality of self evidence, and the enclave is threatened. This may happen in many ways, some of which may be entirely 'internal' to a particular society. And others may be through wider dialogue. An example of this is the successful disruption of the enclaved character of the household in development studies needs talk. Runaway needs then are subject to struggles to redepoliticise and enclave the discourse, and may become the subject of institutional contests to regulate and provide.

Thus one could possibly see that the runaway need of gendered poverty has come to be re-enclaved as the poverty of female headed households (Jackson 1996) and also thereby constituted a 'target group' which is less politicised, for development interventions, than intrahousehold 'interference'. The collapse of gender into the poverty trap appears from this perspective as a process of depoliticisation and the capture of a runaway need. To examine 'our' (meaning gender researchers who see themselves as in dialogue with development policy and practice) role in this is to confront the ways in which we claim to represent oppositional needs talk, to define the content of new needs, and sometimes to be party to the domestication of runaway needs.

The institutionalisation of gender has in many ways reprivated what was originally oppositional needs talk. The arguments against WID and women targeted activities, the enthusiasm for gender mainstreaming (Razawi and Miller 1995), and the institutional adoption of the practical/strategic distinction as a vocabulary of gender need (Moser 1993) and gender training as a strategy for change, are discursive struggles, the outcomes of which are not yet known. New vocabularies, e.g. accountability, (Kardam, 1995; Goetz 1995) suited to new authoritative claims, are emerging to contest the bureaucratic reprivation of gender.

5 Universal vs Local 'Truths'

Poverty reduction then appears in poststructuralist perspectives as an imperialist narrative, universalising, essentialising and politically sinister since it justifies hegemonic development interventions. Local 'truths' are seen to be an alternative. Localism is, of course, also found in development neo-populism, where, since the early 1980s, there has been an alternative understanding of well-being and ill-being grounded in local concepts and the self perceptions of the poor (Chambers 1983; Beck 1994).

In these, a communitarianism notion of a unitary community is implicitly and explicitly posed as the source of counter narratives, resistance and subaltern voices. But the inconsistency which refuses to subject localism, and the idea of the local, to the same deconstruction as globalism reveals the continuing entrapment of postmodernism in dualistic divisions in which, if global equals bad, then local

equals good. Jane Parpart and Marianne Marchand in their recent book **Feminism, Poststructuralism, Development** use as a subtitle the phrase 'Exploding the canon'. But why are we exploding only one canon?

Local narratives and communities are internally divided, especially, but not only, along gender lines. They have divided conceptions of well-being, and accord voice differentially to their members in how local discourses of well-being are formed, and may exclude and marginalise as effectively as alien western concepts of well-being. Indeed Sherry Ortner criticises 'resistance studies' for their ethnographic 'thinness' which she sees as a consequence of a poststructural paralysis in the face of politics internal to subaltern groups (Ortner 1995).

In addition to the concept of the unitary community, the relativistic notion of justice is incompatible with universalist ideas of gender justice. If 'a given society is just if its substantive life is lived in a certain way – that is, in a way faithful to the shared understandings of the members' (Waltzer quoted by Glover p127) then potentially the subordination of women becomes 'just'. But what are these shared understandings?

Feminist critics (Benhabib 1995; Ortner 1995) have argued that cultures and communities cannot be represented as bounded wholes without internal politics, contradictions and debates, and without alternatives in the meanings and actions available to individuals. Benhabib suggests we need to distinguish between 'communities of conversation' and culturally specific ethnic communities, in which what determines who belongs to the former shifts with the subject of the 'conversation' and the

problem at hand. Such communities may sometimes coincide with ethnic boundaries but do not necessarily do so – 'We are all participants in different communities of conversation as constituted by the intersecting axes of our different interests, projects and life situations' (1995: 247). This seems to me a concept which both reflects the internal (gender) politics of communities as well as capturing the sense in which many western and local 'feminists' do indeed 'talk' the same language and are engaged on the same project, without casting this conversation in terms of imperialism and hegemony.

A postmodern pessimism might suggest that subaltern women cannot speak (Spivak 1985), but more hopeful approaches to communication and resistance see agency in silence (Rajan 1993; Mahoney 1996), the possibility of voice and the refusals and reformulations of daily life as an ongoing dialogue between actors and the social structures they experience. One of the points made by Seyla Benhabib is that it is mistaken to conceptualise individuals as either insiders (participants) or outsiders (observers) in a particular society, for 'Individuals themselves can also become observers of their own ways of life if they acquire a critical distance from it and begin to challenge the normative order' (1995: 238). If the growth of this kind of social reflexivity occurs with modernity, as often claimed, then subaltern 'insiders', through stepping back and looking at their societies through another optic which might include universalist values, may be enabled to challenge discourses and act up and against. Furthermore, if such individuals seek to enlist development discourses in these struggles – implicitly in actions or explicitly in speech – then why should one deny such claims?

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